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ABSTRACT

Data from the West Virginia Department of Education reveals that from September 1991 to January 1992, school districts reported 18,915 out-of-school suspensions involving 12,997 students. In 1995, the West Virginia State Legislature enacted the Safe Schools Act, which specifically mandates suspension for no less than 12 consecutive months for possession of a deadly weapon, assaulting a school employee, or attempting to sell illegal drugs. Although there is little evidence that suspension and expulsion are effective in changing student behavior, their use has increased in schools across the nation. A telephone survey investigated the attitudes and perceptions of 141 regular and special education teachers, principals, and special education coordinators in West Virginia regarding the use of suspension as a disciplinary measure. Survey questions addressed typical behaviors leading to suspension, communication, understanding and following regulations, variations among school districts, alternative resources, educators' sense of fairness, effectiveness of discipline codes, and the possible relationship between student suspension and school dropout. Findings reveal that the reasons for use of out-of-school suspension often were not related to student violence, and that practitioners did not believe that suspension is either effective or equitably administered. School personnel often felt that their attempts to address individual student needs were stymied by policy mandates. Of particular concern were the frequency with which students with disabilities were suspended and an apparent hesitancy to utilize and modify the Individual Education Planning process to monitor misbehavior. Alternative learning centers were by far the most frequently mentioned need of school systems. (Contains 16 references.) (LP)

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SUSPENSION, A WAKE-UP CALL:
RURAL EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SUSPENSION

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Abstract

Increasing rates of reported youth violence and and crime have exerted pressure on schools to respond. This recently reported rise in youth crime is especially troubling, given that the national overall crime rate is declining (Brendtro & Ness, 1995). Violence within schools has become a focal point for national media. In response, schools are caught between providing learning environments and assuring the rights of all students, including those who may have committed violent acts. Students who misbehave in schools are frequently suspended, although there is evidence that out-of-school suspension is ineffective in changing student behavior. This research group conducted a qualitative telephone survey investigating the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and administrators of middle and secondary schools regarding suspension used as a disciplinary measure. Survey questions explored such areas as most recent and most typical behaviors leading to suspension, communication, understanding and following of regulations, variations among districts, alternative resources, educators' sense of fairness, effectiveness of the discipline codes, and the possible relationship between suspension and dropping out before graduation. Findings revealed that the reasons for use of out-of-school suspension are often not related to student violence, and that practitioners do not believe that suspension is either effective or equitably administered. School personnel expressed that they often feel stymied in their attempts to address individual student needs by policy mandated from the top down. Of particular concern is the frequency with which students with disabilities are suspended and an apparent hesitancy to utilize and modify the Individual Education Planning (IEP) process to monitor misbehavior.

Suspension, a Wake-up Call: Rural Educators' Attitudes Toward Suspension

Media exploitation of violence coupled with powerful, fear-producing political propaganda, may induce an angry, punitive mood that poisons the public spirit (Brendtro & Ness, 1995; Kauffman, 1995). As politicians call for swift and severe punishment for criminal acts, it becomes commonplace to respond to violence with an increasingly "get tough" stance. In such a climate, it's not surprising that schools focus more on punishment than on addressing the situation that created the problems in the first place.

In 1991-92, the West Virginia Department of Education collected data regarding the use of suspension and expulsion in West Virginia schools. The State's data revealed that during the period from September, 1991 to January, 1992 (five months) 18,915 out-of-school suspensions were reported by county school systems. The unduplicated number of students suspended during this time period was 12,997 students from across all grade levels. Nearly fifty percent (50%) of these students have repeated suspensions. This is equivalent to nearly ten percent (10%) of all students attending West Virginia public schools. Actual days of instruction lost due to suspension amounted to 41,538 days. Although fifty one percent (51%) of the reported suspensions occurred at the secondary level, 7,677 cases occurred at middle school level, and 1,585 occurred at elementary level. This data was compiled in 1992, however, there is no reason to believe that incidents of suspension are decreasing. In fact, these estimates may be conservative at best, since they reflect only reported cases.

The West Virginia State Legislature enacted the 1995 Safe Schools Act, which specifically mandates suspension and expulsion for not less than twelve (12) consecutive months for possession of a deadly weapon, assaulting a school employee, or attempting to sell illegal drugs. In the case where these infractions were committed by a student with disabilities, the Individual Education Planning (IEP) committee may recommend to place the student in an alternative educational setting for up to forty-five days (Safe Schools Act).

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The obligation of schools to provide an alternative education program for all expelled or suspended students is not clear. This issue is illustrated by a recent court ruling in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. A sixteen year old student was suspended for one calendar year for bringing a gun to school. The court ruled that the student "forfeited his right to attend a specific school, but not his right to educational facilities and services within his home county" (JMP vs. Greenbrier Board of Education). Since the school district did not provide this student with an alternative educational setting, the court granted the right for the student to return to his school. This decision upheld the student's right to a "free thorough and efficient education" even when suspended or expelled in a disciplinary action (Boy Suspended, 1995).

There is little evidence that suspension and expulsion are effective in bringing about changes in student behavior ((Children's Defense Fund, 1985; Comerford & Jacobson, 1987; Diem, 1988; and Johnson, 1989). In spite of the lack of evidence to assert that suspension and expulsion are effective, there is evidence that its use has increased in schools across the nation. The Children's Defense Fund declared that the suspension of children from all levels of school has become a problem of national proportion. As a disciplinary procedure, suspension is often abused and its use deprives students of the school services they urgently need (Children's Defense Fund, 1985).

Several critical issues and questions emerge as schools move to adopt policies to deal with student behaviors. First, how serious is the threat of increased youth violence and crime in our schools? Are students committing increasingly violent and disruptive acts in school settings? Second, what are typical school level procedures regarding student discipline, and how effective have local policies been in providing safe schools? Third, what are the likely effects of mandates such as the Safe Schools Act, and to what extent are these mandates likely to bring about progress toward the goals of establishing sage school environments? Fourth, given the provisions regarding students with disabilities, what are the effects of these policies on students and teachers in Special Education? Finally, how clearly understood and compatible are the mandates with the mind set of educators? If practitioners fail to understand or agree with the assumptions and particulars of the mandates, then the policies may ultimately fail in their implementation.

The function of this study was to ascertain the perspectives of educators regarding discipline issues, and the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion as a discipline measure. Educators descriptions of typical incidents of suspension or expulsion were sought in order to understand common practice at the local school level. Example incidents were solicited.

Methods

Because our group was interested in practitioners' attitudes and beliefs about school discipline and their opinions about school policy, a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis was selected. We talked by telephone with primarily secondary regular education teachers, special education teachers, principals, and special education coordinators from all fifty-five (55) counties in West Virginia. Schools were randomly selected from the listing of schools for each county, and principals interviewed. Schools were again randomly selected, and teachers were interviewed based on availability. As many coordinators as possible were contacted.

Subjects

A total of 141 unduplicated interviews were conducted. Participants included thirty-five (35) special education teachers, (38) regular education teachers, thirty-two (32) principals, and thirty-six (36) special education coordinators.

Instruments

The research group collaboratively developed interview protocols designed to tap interviewees' knowledge, opinions, experience in relation to several broad themes the group had identified from the literature. These preliminary themes included discipline policies and procedures regarding regular and special education students, equity and consistency of administration, efficacy, and possible alternatives. The protocols were designed to obtain some estimation of frequency by including items of forced choice (yes/no) responses, however, most questions were designed to elicit richness of response. Separate but similar protocols were designed for Principals and coordinators. The protocol design was the same for regular and special education teachers, allowing for some comparison of response between these two categories of participants.

Procedures

All interviews were conducted by doctoral students from West Virginia University Department of Special Education within a two month time frame in the Spring. Interviewers practiced using the protocols by interviewing fellow students and by conducting several practice interviews (Spradley, 1979). Each interview was initiated by a phone call to the interviewee at their school or County Board Office. After an explanation of the study, the interviewees were asked if they were willing to participate. A very small number (three) refused to participate. They were replaced by random selection. If any of the interviewees were unavailable when the initial call was made, arrangements were made to call back at a more convenient time or to speak with anyone in that category who was available to participate at the time. Interviewers used the protocol as a guide, however, they did probe to extend item completion and detailed response.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

The initial stages of synthesis included frequency counts of forced choice and categorical responses. Since protocols varied with role, and forced choice responses are not consistent across roles, they were tabulated separately for coordinators, principals, and teachers.

Qualitative methods for synthesizing data were employed (Dillman, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schumaker & McMillan, 1993; Spradley, 1979). A qualitative consensual analysis was conducted in which all members of the research group read the interview notes in their entirety, identifying common themes. Each theme was described by several research group members. Consensus was reached and verified by seeking additional exemplars of the theme in the data. Next, data was tagged and categorized according to identified themes, and responses were sorted into the identified theme category envelopes. Reliability was established by various group members rereading envelop contents and discussing their applicability to that particular theme. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. This method was repeated until most of the data was placed into one or another of the envelopes. Only approximately eighteen percent (18%) of the data was not identifiable as representing any of the commonly agreed upon themes.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Examination of frequencies indicate that all schools surveyed have procedures in place for the discipline and suspension of students. All reporting districts have written discipline policies. Overall, eighty-six percent (86%) of special education coordinators are informed regarding the suspension of students with disabilities, although some reported extensive delay in the system of reporting. Principals are the primary decision makers regarding suspension. While eighty-seven percent (87%) of principals have received inservice training on discipline policies, only forty-five percent (45%) of regular education teachers and forty-three percent (43%) of special education teachers have received inservice training along these lines.

Most educators interviewed reported that teachers are often consulted in the decision to suspend a student. Some reported that School Based Assessment Teams (SBAT) are included in the decision making process to suspend. Very few interviewees reported parents proactively involved, although parents were frequently mentioned as having a role the reentry process. Most regular educators (84%) and special educators (91%) reported that although students could make up missed assignments during the suspension period, few formal procedures or supports for transitioning suspended students back into the school routine are in place. Some students participate in formal reentry meetings. Parent conferencing is sometimes required.

Although West Virginia students are suspended for an array of reasons, the most common reasons for suspension reported are fighting among students, tobacco use, and defiance, disobedience, or insubordination.

Regular educators (74%) and special educators (68%) reported accommodations for students with disabilities are in place, and that every attempt is made to comply with state policies, however, that many of the students being suspended are students with disabilities. In some districts, suspending students with disabilities is rare, while in others, almost half of their district's suspensions involve students with disabilities. One teacher reported that all forty of her students with behavior disorders have been suspended at one time or another.

The extent to which the Individual Education Planning (IEP) process is used to assist educators with discipline comes into question. Regular educators (45%) and special educators (37%) report that IEPs are examined prior to suspension less than half the time. IEPs are very infrequently modified as a result of suspension. Regular educators report this occurrence eight percent (8%) and special educators only fourteen percent (14%) of the time.

Qualitative Analysis (Themes)

Qualitative analysis of the data identified nine primary themes described as follows:

West Virginia Students Changes in student behaviors from past to present were described as less respect for authority and more defiance, disobedience, or insubordination. Educators did not report students to be engaging in more violent acts than in the past. They did not report feeling unsafe on their jobs.

Reasons for Suspension Interviewees reported a range reasons for suspension, from skipping school to endangering others. Rules governing suspension are clearly outlined in writing, however, they are not equitably enforced. Students perceived as "trouble-makers" are more likely to be suspended, while others who violate the same rules are less likely to be held accountable, according to respondents. Procedures are not consistently enforced across schools, especially for less serious infractions.

Benefits of Suspension Practitioners report that suspension rarely benefits the person being disciplined, but often benefits teachers and other students in volatile situations by providing a "cooling down period" for all concerned. Suspension is often seen as the only leverage school administrators have to send a message to all students about what behaviors will not be tolerated. Some interviewees reported that suspension may serve as a "wake-up call" to parents.

Suspension Is Not a Punishment Many practitioners believe that suspension is not viewed as a negative experience by most students who are suspended. Some students use suspension to engage in seemingly more attractive activities than attending school, especially when parents are unable to provide adequate supervision or do not reinforce suspension as a disciplinary action.

Suspension Hinders the Educational Process Practitioners report that often those students who are suspended are already academically behind their peers, and that they fall further behind due to loss of instructional time. They are disconnected from supports developed within the school environment. Teachers have to double-step to facilitate their make-up work. Some activities missed are impossible to make up, particularly vocational and social skill building activities.

IEP Goals & Objectives are Not Working According to interviewees, the IEP process only delays the administration of punishment and rarely guides discipline decisions. Several interviewees indicated that IEP goals and objectives are related to academic strengths and needs, and that only students with behavior disorders have IEPs addressing social and behavioral issues. Only some reported that IEPs are examined prior to suspension occurring, other than to determine causality. The data indicated that IEPs are seldom modified after suspension to address the behavior for which the suspension occurred, unless there was a change of placement being considered.

Equal Treatment Many practitioners supported a common belief that schools must treat all students the by the same set of rules. The practice of making special allowances for students who may have disabilities was seen as unfair to "regular" students. They explained further that students with discipline or behavior problems must learn to adapt to social demands and obey rules, as they will have to do so in the larger society when they exit school. A strong feeling was expressed that special treatment during their school years may lead them to expect special treatment as adults, and this is neither fair to them or to society.

Policy Ties Hands Interviewees believe they have little choice when a student violates a school, district, or state policy. Many cited the WV Safe Schools Act, WV 2419 (the Special Education Policy - Revised 1995, or the State School Code of Conduct when discussing discipline. Frequent mention was made of local policies that predetermine discipline procedures for each offense. Following these prescriptions for discipline does not allow much room for

individualization. Some felt that principals should be able to exercise more discretion in fitting the punishment to the individual or circumstance, while others reported that principals wield an enormous amount of discretion regarding punishments assigned for misbehavior.

Workable Alternatives Practitioners worry about the lack of workable alternatives to suspension. Some schools have in-school suspension, shadowing programs, after-school suspension, or alternative learning centers. Many interviewees whose schools do not have such alternatives in place expressed a dire need for them. Many perceived a lack of resources necessary to implement such alternatives. Only one respondent mentioned the need for developing a proactive approach to discipline issues.

Discussion

Although youth violence and crime are reported to be increasing nationally, this trend is not reported by West Virginia educators. Our data is consistent with findings by the West Virginia Department of Education in 1991-92 indicating that the largest number of suspensions by far were in response to fighting among students or insubordination. Tobacco use and not attending are also frequent causes for suspension.

Virtually all of our interviewees reported the belief that suspension is ineffective in changing students' behaviors, yet it continues to be a frequent school response to misbehavior (Children's Defense Fund, 1985; Comerford & Jacobson, 1987; Guetzloe, 1994). This short sighted response to student needs is critical. Suspending students for not attending does not foster attendance; suspending a student for smoking or chewing tobacco does not cure an addiction to nicotine, and so forth. Suspension does not address the problems of learners. Further, it is questionable that we can punish persons into transforming their lives (Brendtro and Ness, 1995).

Interviewees' collective response that all students should be subject to the same discipline policies does not reflect a clear understanding about the complexities of possible relationships between disabilities and misbehavior. The incompatibility of this belief with the provisions of state and federal law predicts that the rights of students with disabilities will often go unprotected unless substantial effort is made to impact the beliefs and actions of educators in the field of practice.

State policies, such as the WV Safe Schools Act, may serve to remove the responsibility for student discipline and guidance away from communities and families. Such policy may not be responsive to the variation across West Virginia families and communities that may be in a better position to respond with some understanding of the context surrounding a particular student's actions.

Alternative learning centers were by far the most frequently mentioned need of school systems. Some mentioned the need for interagency cooperation and counseling support, however, most methods suggested involved placing responsibility outside the school environment. Interviewees did not mention alternative ideas for restructuring schools so that they can be great places in which to learn. Students must perceive that education is relevant to their lives in the present and the future. Johnson & Johnson, (1991) have suggested that in order to meet student needs, schools must become creative, caring communities. Opportunities for transitional activities, establishing faculty and peer mentorships, partnerships with community resources, Teacher Assistance Teams, Interdisciplinary Team decision-making, are but a few ideas that are being explored. To respond to student needs by putting troubled people out of our schools is far more costly to society than providing in-school supports for all learners.

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